

John Lysaker

Taking Emerson Personally

in loving memory of Eben Patrick McAvay (1981–2004)

I am drawn to Emerson by self-culture, the project of cultivating a personal life, one that I have in some sense fashioned and that eloquently expresses my character in its diversities and my coherencies, to the degree that they exist. Self-culture is a watchword of the nineteenth century that freely translates the German *Bildung*. We might just call it “culture,” as many did and do, Emerson included, were it not that the English term now denotes little more than the social fabric backgrounding and foregrounding human life, thus eliding a crucial aspect of *bildung*: it is a project at which one can fail.

The ambiguity is nothing new. Even Emerson suffered the problem as he notes in a journal of 1837: “Culture—how much meaning the Germans affix to the word & how unlike to the English sense.” For clarity then, and to acknowledge my inheritance of a project that captivated nineteenth-century America, “self-culture” orients these reflections.

Self-culture is a theme that runs through Emerson’s writings, from the 1830s into the 1860s. And it is not just an incidental theme, as this passage from “The American Scholar” makes plain in its negation and affirmation.

Men such as they are, very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money. . . . And why not? for they aspire to the highest, and this, in their sleep-walking, they dream is highest. Wake them, and they shall quit the false good, and leap to the true. . . . This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man.

Nor is self-culture—the prefix *self* beginning a domestication of *bildung*, bringing it within the province of a person, as opposed to some wave of a figure,

like society, race, or nation—merely a topic that Emerson addresses, say in the “Introductory” to his *Human Culture* lectures, or in the “Culture” essay that one finds in *Conduct of Life*. Self-culture is also a matter that Emerson’s writings express and perform. As many have noted, Emerson’s texts, whether journal entry, public address, or essay, enact the declaration from “literary ethics” with which Emerson elevates himself to the ranks of Plato, Shakespeare, and Milton: “I will also essay to be.” That is, Emerson’s writing is Emerson elaborating himself, practicing self-culture on the page, in the sentence, with the word, “building up a force of thought which may be turned at will on any subjects,” to rely on Emerson’s contemporary, William Ellery Channing.

By temperament and training, both philosophical, I’m rarely able to leave well enough alone. As soon as I found myself turning toward issues of self-culture in Emerson (and I need you to hear the word *issues* at least twice), I began to worry about what it meant to work with Emerson. What haunted me was not the question “What is a philosopher doing reading Emerson?” Matters of philosophical import are everywhere in his work. Moreover, I am not without role models in this regard, most notably Stanley Cavell, though there are others such as Cornel West. Rather, my perplexity was that of an obsessive who returns to what seems secure, even legitimate, and frets: “But do you really know what’s going on here?” There is something neurotic in this kind of revolution, this incessant turning back upon oneself. But can one bent on self-knowledge do otherwise, at least every now and then, particularly when the luster of our inspiration fades, in what Emerson would term our idle hours? I doubt it, particularly if Emerson is right when he insists, repeatedly, that “there is nothing mean in nature,” or states more elaborately in “Spiritual Laws” that “Human character evermore publishes itself. The most fugitive deed and word, the mere doing of a thing, the intimated purpose, expresses character.”

I confess to this compulsion because it makes evident that my turn to Emerson, my reading him, my writing about him is part and parcel of my own self-culture, that more is going on here than a gathering of signs to render “Emerson” transparent. In fact, in addressing you I am also offering your self-culture something to take or leave, in part or whole—for now, consider it a way of a reading, one that takes Emerson personally, as if, in a sense I’ll try to specify, our lives were at stake in his address and the ways in which we receive it.

When a philosopher frets over reading, you might suppose the concern will be primarily epistemological. But my fuss is less a matter of ensuring accurate readings than of examining reading as a practice that manifests my character. I’m thus more concerned with how and why we read than with

arming myself with a purported method. In fact, I'm rather distrustful of the language of method and what it seems to promise.

Rhetorically, "method" suggests something secure, a mode of engagement that is particularly appropriate to the matter at hand, that has secured a kind of privileged access, something in virtue of which one's reading would be more than a series of fallible steps along paths opening within hermeneutic circles. But one cannot elude such circles, and thus reading is always a matter of double reading, of reading a text against a previous construal, be it one's own, another's, or the prereflective construals that one's sociopsychological background conditions instantiate. Epistemologically speaking, then, philosophy—or more generally, theory—has nothing particularly insightful to offer interpretation.

For those who find this glib, let me add the following. A text is readable only on the basis of certain preconditions—in the least, literacy, cultural associations, and an implicit or explicit theory of textuality, one that delimits meaning with reference to such elements as authorial intent, unconscious projections, class struggles, genres and forms, literary devices like enjambments, and so forth. Given those conditions, we proceed by tracking the interplay of textual elements, whether formal, thematic, or performative, until a meaning becomes apparent—ubiquitous and unstable metaphysical oppositions, Plato's esoteric doctrine, or Nietzsche's self-overcoming inquiry into truth. With some meaning at one's disposal, one then compares one's efforts with those of others, real or imagined—activities suggesting that reading is, at least formally, a communicative act. And so one continues until one imagines one has it well in hand.

As I see it, interpretations clash when they track differently or disagree about what elements delimit the meaning of the text, and an interpretation succeeds to the degree that it shows how some set of elements combine to present certain meanings rather than others. As Adorno insists in "Lyric Poetry and Society," all readings, even sociological readings, must vindicate claims in and through the text. I stress this because ascertaining a context is not the same as interpreting a text, just as looking up a word in a dictionary is not the same as tracing its meaning within a poem. This is not to say that texts generate their own meaning. Nor is it to say that the text is a fixed playing field. Rather, my insistence is that whatever meaning is *found* there, whether it involves class struggle, sublimated desire, authorial intent, or language speaking itself, must be found *there*.

Now, if one could secure from the outset the propriety of those conditions that make a text readable in the first place, which include the elements whose interactions produce meaning, one might imagine the process of vision and revision coming to an end. But those initial steps are part and parcel of the interpretation, and thus equally susceptible to revision. Said otherwise, every interpretation, even a long-standing one, may find itself in the scene that opens Emerson's "Experience":

Where do we find ourselves? In a series, of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair: there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday. Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glimmer. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again.

Because this fate might befall any interpretation at any time, it strikes me that philosophy will never convincingly lay hold of criteria, say on the basis of a theory of textuality, that will categorically distinguish better from worse readings, and thus it has little to offer interpretation by way of epistemic insight. One would do better to take to heart, and repeatedly, questions such as "Now where and how does it say that?" As Emerson tells an audience in 1837:

I acknowledge that the mind is also a distorting medium so long as its aims are not pure. But the moment the individual declares his independence, takes his life into his own hands, and sets forth in search of culture, the love of truth is a sufficient gauge. It is very clear that he can have no other.

But more than epistemic questions arise as we read. In taking Emerson's texts into my own go at self-culture, I've come to regard him as a peer of sorts, as someone with something to tell me about how I might cultivate my life. But his texts are old, their author dead. So what kind of reading is this? How am I receiving this pile of texts signed "Emerson"?

Let me begin by way of negation. In reading Emerson through self-culture, I am not involved in source criticism. My concern is not Emerson's sources, whether within his corpus—tying together journal, lecture, and essay passages—or without—determining what precisely Emerson drew from Coleridge, Kant, and de Staël regarding genius. Nor am I much concerned with Emerson's influence on later thinkers, for example, Nietzsche, as great or slight as it may be. I admire such work, but after a while, it makes me impatient. I want a reading eventually to ask: "Should I think and/or act in this way? What claim does it have upon me?" Source-critical treatments of a text stand aloof from such questions, however. Instead, they regard the text as a function in a causal series, and work to locate that text's contributions to the series, discerning contingencies and effects—for instance, Emerson got that from William Ellery Channing, and William James took this from Emerson.

The essays of self-culture are also not principally comparativist, and for a similar reason. While it is genuinely instructive, for example, to compare how Emerson and Thoreau received the *Bhagavad-Gita*, unless we eventually champion or descry aspects of the how and what of their reception, we are left with artifacts whose place in self-culture is merely ornamental. Again, valuable work, but not the work of self-culture, and thus not the kind of work I want my reading of Emerson to do.

Without much precision, I would say at this point that I'm hoping more to work with Emerson than to talk about him. I'm thus not all that hot about what one might call Emerson's considered views on matters of long-standing philosophical concern, such as freedom and determinism. I'm mistrustful of the authority of so-called "considered views." As readers of extant work, authors are just that, readers, and not necessarily the best. Focusing upon a supposedly considered view might very well obscure thoughts and/or implications whose brilliance eluded the author's considerations. I prefer to focus on problematics, not theses or views. What grabs me is that to which a text or corpus responds, what Heidegger would term its *Sache*. My principal concern is what to think about the matter at hand, not which view Emerson eventually elected.

But what, one rightfully asks, does it mean to attend to the matter at hand while interpreting a text? Emerson's feel for Shakespeare gives us the beginnings of an answer—"the Genius draws up the ladder after him, when the creative age goes up to heaven, and gives way to a new, which seeks the works, and asks in vain for a history." But what does this entail, and must any

such reading prove ahistorical? I think not, but it will take some time to show you why.

In seeking works instead of authors, I am not supposing that works simply await our gaze. I concur with Emerson's assertion in the *English Literature* series of 1835–36 that "Reading must not be passive. The pupil must conspire with the Teachers. It needs Shakspear, it needs Bacon, to read Shakspear and Bacon in the best manner." As Heidegger will say about a hundred years later, preparing his students for an encounter with Hölderlin, reading is a struggle against ourselves, a "*Kampf gegen uns*," one in which we attempt to translate ourselves into the fundamental sensibility and mood in and with which a work addresses us. Emerson offers us a similar though differently mooded thought in *Representative Men*. "Shakspeare is the only biographer of Shakspeare, and even he can tell nothing except to the Shakspeare in us, that is, to our most apprehensive and sympathetic hour." Odd thoughts. Let's see if we can't position ourselves so as to apprehend their claim.

In comporting myself toward Emerson's texts through something like the Emerson in me, I am approaching them as their secret addressee, to invoke a figure offered by Osip Mandelstam in 1916. This is not narcissism. I am not presuming that Emerson wrote with me in mind. Rather, to engage a text as its secret addressee is to respect a dimension of its performativity. Every speech-act, no matter its content, no matter its form, has a second-person facet—it is addressed to another. And so too the essay and the lecture, just like the poem. Mandelstam on his mind, Paul Celan writes in 1958: "The poem can be, because it is a manifestation of language and thus dialogical by nature, a letter in a bottle sent with the faith—certainly not always full of hope—that it might sometime and somewhere wash ashore, perhaps on the land of the heart."

Let this be a first designation, then. When I say I am taking Emerson personally, this is to say that I hear or read him interpersonally, that I am reading a speaker as his or her addressee, or to defer to a figure from his journals:

Happy is he who looks only into his work to know if it will succeed, never into the times or the public opinion; and who writes from the love of imparting certain thoughts & not from the necessity of sale—who writes always to *the unknown friend*.

Emerson's texts are thus not merely outcroppings on the mountain of objective spirit, although they are certainly that insofar as they are part and parcel of our cultural record. But they also address us with a second-person liveliness, and

our reception of them should register that, just as one should acknowledge a friend's criticism as a criticism and not simply as the product of sociopsychological forces.

You may be thinking: "Shouldn't a philosopher be concerned with Emerson's claims?" I am. I reject Emerson's recurrent theodicy, his belief that a divine being orders history in a way that is ultimately and thus persistently just. "What can be more sublime," he tells an early audience, "than this doctrine that the soul of the world does impregnate every atom and every spirit with its omnipotent virtue, so that all things are tuned and set to good. Evil is merely privative not absolute." And I am cheered by and will defend his insistence that self-culture is intrinsically dependent upon enabling conditions—"You cannot have one well-bred man without a whole society of such." But a claim is not merely some proposition floating in a space between our ears, ascribing predicates to subjects or offering predictions. Nor is it simply a premise or a conclusion, a logically determinate rung in the ladder of an argument.

I am not suggesting that Emerson fails to offer arguments, or that his claims do not have what has come to be called "propositional content." He has arguments and his remarks refer to states of affairs: emanations, intuitions, and moods. My point, rather, is that Emerson's claims are not reducible to that content or the logical forms in which they are presented. Moreover, any reading that proceeds by way of such reductions misreads the claims that Emerson advances, ignoring both the intersubjectivity of Emerson's address as well as other performative dimensions opening within the genres of the lecture and essay.

Much has been said about the genre of the essay, from its individuality to its spontaneity to its fragmentary nature, and much of that discussion applies to Emerson's own essays. What I would stress here, however, is that Emerson's essays are concentrated versions of his lectures. This is not to remind us of the obvious, namely, that many of Emerson's essays had their first run at the lectern. Rather, my point is that what Emerson sought in his lectures, "an eloquence that can agitate," also orients his essays. In a journal of 1839, Emerson writes: "Is it not plain that not in senates or courts or chambers of commerce but in the conversation of the true philosopher the eloquence must be found that can agitate, convict, inspire, & possess us & guide us to a true peace? I look upon the Lecture room as the true church of today. . . ." To my ear, this passage holds a key to the door through which we might responsibly receive Emerson's claims.

Emerson's essays and lectures are agitating in the broad sense—they start us thinking, in irritation or excitement. They thus not only ruminate as William Gass has suggested, but nip and gnaw at what passes for truisms—that consistency is a virtue, that Jesus was an unsurpassable moralist, or that an exemplar cannot be great and flawed. Not that they tell us to be agitated, or give us imperatives, although at times they do. Rather, they are agitating performances, rhetorically provoking us, say, with the kind of overstatement we just witnessed. “Is it not plain that not in senates or courts or chambers of commerce but in the conversation of the true philosopher the eloquence must be found that can agitate. . . ?” But such a matter is far from plain. In fact, coming as it does from one who holds self-reliance in such high esteem, I find the appeal more like bait dangling before me, bait that if taken, forces me to determine the matter for myself.

Emerson's writings are also full of accusation—for example, “We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other.” Such remarks convict us directly, driving us to recall (or hope for) postures that rise above the cower of cowardice. At times we find ourselves convicted less directly, however, and often in the passages we find most inspiring.

What is it we heartily wish of each other? Is it to be pleased and flattered? No, but to be convicted and exposed, to be shamed out of our nonsense of all kinds, and made men of, instead of ghosts and phantoms. We are weary of gliding ghostlike through the world, which is itself so slight and unreal. We crave a sense of reality, though it come in strokes of pain.

Here Emerson is baiting us with our own desire to grow, to improve, to leave dross and moss behind. And while I thrill to the thought—and I do, even now—I realize that most of the time I don't desire this, at least not strongly, but live “afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of others.” And so, in my affirmation of that with which Emerson tempts me, shame rises as I realize how often I do not live the life I really want. In passages such as these, it is less that Emerson accuses me than that he enables me to accuse myself, thus drawing out of me what he so often demands of me: self-reliance.

While provocative, Emerson's lectures and essays ultimately resist indoctrination. In “Considerations by the Way,” he writes: “Although this garrulity of advising is born with us, I confess that life is rather a subject of wonder, than of didactics.” And as he tells an audience in a better-known passage: “Truly speak-

ing, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul." Socratic rather than encyclopedic in their orientation, Emerson's remarks thus seek to "possess" their addressees with something other than doctrine.

But what else is there?

Consider the essay "Experience." It opens with a manifold realization that the steps that have brought us here are not what we took them to be, while the steps that lie ahead may buck and sway and topple us should we attempt to ascend them on the basis of what we know. Perhaps our theories may fall flat. Or, more powerfully, our children might perish, and leave us both empty across years we imagined would be full, and guilty that we were able to live on without them. Full in the swim and glitter of this uncertainty, the essay proceeds to probe and test the "lords of life" whose march the prefatory poem marks as defining moments of a day, and all in the hopes of securing a foothold. But Emerson's reckoning, speculative and incisive as it is, fails to call these lords to order—among them, illusion, temperament, surface, and surprise. Instead, in the third to last paragraph, he confesses, "I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me." And he accepts, in both a theoretical and practical way, the moral this insight imposes: "I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world *I think*. I observe the difference, and shall observe it." The essay thus fails to overcome the impasse with which it began. This is not to say the essay fails, however. It seeks an "eloquence that agitates." Thus, if it brings us to this step and leaves us there (and it leaves us there in the speaker's commitment to an almost ritualistic observance of the difference between appearance and reality), then the essay succeeds insofar as it prods us to determine for ourselves, in and through our observances, what we need in order to move on, to ascend the steps of experience, to pursue the "true romance which the world exists to realize . . . the transformation of genius into practical power," to cite the essay's cheering, inspiring final line.

A proper reception of Emerson's texts thus not only requires an acknowledgment of the challenges they pose—challenges to our beliefs, habits, and character—but also a willingness to assume the tasks they set, conclude them as we will. *Conduct of Life* is thus not simply the title of one of Emerson's late collections; it names that which his claims consistently invoke as a matter in question for both speaker and addressee. In reading Emerson, then, one should be drawn to the etymological roots of "claim," the Latin *clamare*, to call or shout

out. An Emersonian claim calls out, shouts even, in order to compel us to take it to heart and adjust our lives accordingly.

In stressing the performative aspects of Emerson's texts, I am not suggesting that their claims are provocations without content, as if we could translate each into one stern command such as "think for yourself." Emerson's lectures and essays offer numerous thoughts purporting to be insights. And while he never systematically binds them together, this does not mean that they are offered ironically. When Emerson tells us, "In our way of talking, we say, 'That is yours, this is mine;' but the poet knows well that it is not his; that it is as strange and beautiful to him as to you," he is offering a phenomenologically astute account of thought. Likewise, anticipating what Heidegger later termed *Geworfenheit*—thrownness—he aptly describes in "The Over Soul" our more general condition. "Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence." Emerson's claims thus not only seek to possess us with the problems they set before us, but also with touchstones from which we might address those problems, touchstones we might ourselves essay, that is, make an experiment of, try out, venture.

I have been outlining what Emerson would regard as a "manner," a way of behaving, a way of reading, of receiving and responding to claims and provocations. At this point I need to add that Emerson's claims are not offered on their own behalf, as if some person "Emerson" were trying to convince us of something in order to have convinced us, in order to have won some argument or even a convert. Instead, they seek our attention on behalf of some matter that has compelled them. Their so-called propositional content is something to which they have been driven to bear witness, and our reception of them is lacking if we overlook this responsive pathos, one quite evident in Emerson's feel for lecturing: "But only then is the orator successful when he is himself agitated & is as much a hearer as any of the assembly."

By tuning the notion of claim with the notion of witnessing, I am underscoring the debt that any claim owes to that which is witnessed. What goes by the name of propositional content is neither the possession of an Emersonian claim nor something entirely produced by an Emersonian text. Rather, Emerson's claims are responses to what has been given to them, made evident. One could state it this way: It isn't that an Emersonian remark lays claim to the matter at hand, but that it is claimed by that matter. In still other words, Emerson's claims become such because they have been called as witnesses for

some matter. Taking Emerson personally is thus not only a matter of receiving his claims as provocative interpersonal addresses, replete with tasks, but also one of attending to the witness and testimony at work in those addresses, and all in order to bring it to the shorelines of one's heart, that is, to receive it as having the potential to claim one as well.

A passage from "New England Reformers" should help us here. Emerson writes: "As every man at heart wishes the best and not inferior society, wishes to be convicted of his error, and to come to himself, so he wishes that the same healing should not stop in his thoughts, but should penetrate his will or active power." This is a remarkable line, the kind Stanley Cavell has helped make legible, one that sketches a landscape that readings should traverse if they wish to join Emerson in pursuit of self-culture. At its close, the line suggests that we keep the company we do (including collections of essays, I would think), because it promises a deepened self-knowledge whose translation into practical power provides a life more fully lived, that is, one with richer and deeper relations. To his readers, then, Emerson seems to be saying *Isn't this why you are here, to come to yourselves? And Aren't these the stakes of your reading—a kind of healing, even empowerment?* We needn't agree with the assertions embedded in these rhetorical questions; but in receiving them we are nevertheless driven to consider why we have sought the company of this text, and that seems Emerson's deeper concern—that we engage him on terms we have thematized and chosen, that we know why we are here, reading, reflecting.

Consider next the opening moments of Emerson's sentence: "As every man at heart wishes . . ." In venturing a description of what goes on in our hearts, the line provokes the reader to search out his or her heart, to pose a similar question, less *Why am I reading this?* than *What do I really believe?* In other words, Emerson is indirectly insisting, as he does at the end of the line, *You'd better be taking this personally*, and rhetorically provoking us to do so.

As it continues, the passage also predicts what one will find in one's heart: a wish for good, ennobling company. For now, my concern is not whether this thought, one recurrent throughout Plato's early dialogues, merits our assent. Rather, I want to direct your attention to how Emerson figures the heart: with a wish, a longing for what is not in our control. In Emerson's implicit instruction to consult our hearts, this figure of the wish instructs us on how to consult our hearts. Our concern should not simply be what we are willing to defend in an agon of debate. Rather, he directs his readers to those matters that have claimed them, those matters on whose behalf they might bear witness, say through an

argument. In his claim about what lurks in our hearts, therefore, Emerson is also tuning his predictive assertion with what we could call the terms of the heart, with the wish, an inclining toward something that has claimed us and has drawn an emphatic response.

Oddly, even surprisingly, I think we are now at a point to make better sense of Emerson's claim that the best reader of Bacon needs Bacon, that one should approach Shakespeare from the Shakespeare within. I think we find the Shakespeare within when we personally attend to the matters to which Shakespeare's claims bear witness and to the tasks those claims initiate, for then we begin to see what it would mean to think in this way, what it might mean to be Bacon, to be Shakespeare, to be the bearer of these thoughts, which is not to say their creator, but one who takes them to heart.

Let's parse this process. First, this is not simply a passive reception. Preparation is required, for as Emerson observes elsewhere, "books are good only as far as a boy is ready for them." After all, to read well, one must be literate, have time, be willing and able to concentrate, be open to having one's mind changed, what is, all in all, as much a matter of mood as it is of opportunity and ability, as Emerson himself notes in "Experience." "We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. It depends on the mood of the man whether he shall see the sunset or a fine poem. There are always sunsets, and there is always genius; but only a few hours so serene that we can relish nature or criticism." Second, one needs to acquire a sense for that to which the work is a response, matters at times quite evident (for instance, throughout his life, Emerson rejects the leveling authority of commerce), and at other times barely perceptible (in championing intuition and conversation, Emerson both instantiates the philosophy of the subject—which regards every thought as a presentation of self-consciousness—and pushes past that paradigm into a more intersubjective one that regards every thought as also presented to an interlocutor). Third, we must also imagine the prospects that await us should our own active power be claimed by thoughts like these, for Emerson is insistent that "Every act of intellection is mainly prospective." For example, if it is the case that, for the attentive, sublimity lurks in every thing, event, even moment, then we must begin to imagine what it would mean to live in the sublimity of a conversation, a meal, a quick trip to the store, a morning shower, and so forth.

I should stress that prospecting is a risky business, for one might find forecast in a given claim a future at odds with the manner in which the claim

first announced itself. For example, Emerson's trust in self-trust, in self-reliance, is empowered by the purportedly divine ground of our involuntary perceptions. But once so empowered, involuntary perceptions may turn against that ground, even venture futures without it, as Emerson seems to do when he says, somewhat peevishly, "but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." Mining prospects thus may broach changes that not only follow from certain claims, but double back upon them, exposing a tenuous force field where, at least initially, there had been a simplicity—that behind which analysis cannot go, to recall Emerson's own description of involuntary perceptions. In other words, prospecting may chance upon futures almost unthinkable at the outset.

These three efforts—preparation, ascertaining that to which the text is a response, and prospecting—amount to a conspiracy with our teachers within an apprehensive and sympathetic hour. Not that our assent is required, as if sympathy necessitated agreement. Rather, the task is to take the claim to heart and apprehend it such that it *might* also claim us for its own, perhaps even in a new manner, one more Bacon than Bacon. In other words, one who conspires with a text may at some point realize, as Emerson did, "Our best thoughts came from others. We heard in their words a deeper sense than the speakers put into them, and could express ourselves in other people's phrases to finer purpose than they knew."

In taking Emerson personally, in receiving his responsive address on the shorelines of my heart, in conspiring with him, I am driven to eschew a strictly historicist regard for textuality. Such readings limit a text's illocutionary reach to its peers. But if I am to receive that address on the shoreline of my heart, then I must also be implicated in what Emerson essays. And if I am implicated in those experiments, then I too am called to attend to that to which they bear witness. Now, it may be the case that I can only share in that witness if I bind the intension of Emerson's claims to concepts extant at the time of their articulation or to then current situations to which a thought or phrase would be a response. I doubt it. Such a position underplays what we might term a text's prospective force, the ways in which its dynamics, even while employing extant forms, bring new meanings to worn tropes. (Consider the fate of "experience" in Dewey's *Experience and Nature* or "asceticism" in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*.) Moreover, such emergences may only come to light given the altered presumptions of future readers, of unknown friends. Emerson records in his journal: "it was not possible to write the history of Shakspear until now. For

it was on the translation of Shakspear into German by Lessing that 'the succeeding rapid burst of German literature was most intimately concerned.' Here certainly is an important particular in the story of that great mind yet how recent! And is this the last fact?" In short, historicism seems to preclude the ways in which a text may prove untimely, or rather, timely for a later set of readers, as Plutarch proved to Emerson. "Plutarch fits me better than Southey or Scott, therefore, I say, there is no age to good writing."

I should stress that by embracing Emerson's address as a living provocation and challenge, I am not receiving it ahistorically. If anything, I am receiving it with a finer feel for historical occurrence than historicism provides. In "History," Emerson writes: "The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary. Thus compelled, the muse of history will utter oracles, as never to those who do not respect themselves." This insistence is well-grounded for at least three reasons. First, insofar as histories are not only told but also received, discursively or otherwise, some activity on the part of the recipient is required. To deny this, to skulk about one's own receptions, to conceal oneself within the repetitions that propel our lives, is tantamount to a kind of self-denial that estranges us from the historical dimensions of our being. Moreover, such denials are hermeneutically suspect. Not only are they naïvely positivistic, as if historical events were ascertainable without interpretation, but they conceal the purposes prompting and orienting their interpretations, the kind of *teloi* that accompany all practices. This kind of concealment troubles me less for the biases it might introduce than for the way in which it obscures the commitments and contributions that orient and follow from a reckoning with history that is itself the unfolding of history. In receiving Emerson's claims, therefore, we need to bring those commitments and effects within the folds of self-culture, both to better apprehend who it is we are becoming, and to consider whether those ends and results square with our deepest wishes.

In refusing the limits of historicism, in treating Emerson as if he were in some sense my contemporary, my reading enters into a perplexing time signature. Let me again make my way with the help of Celan. "For the poem is not timeless. Certainly, it raises a claim to the infinite, it seeks to grasp it through time—but through, not over and above it." In receiving Emerson outside the hermeneutic sensibility of historicism, I am not setting these texts or their reception outside of time—neither event is timeless, *zeitlos*, literally, without time. The texts, full of quotations, explicit and implicit, are repetitions,

the paper of the centenary edition at least one hundred years old. And my readings are no less repetitions, responses to previous readings like Cavell's, dialogues with other addresses, some named (Heidegger) some not (Habermas). But in receiving the texts of Emerson, I am receiving an address that lays claim to the infinite, and in the following sense: it lays claim to a perpetual now in which it speaks. This is not the infinite of indefinite duration nor the omnipresence of what is at once alpha and omega, beginning and end. Rather, it is a perpetually living present, one that arrives with every reception of the work.

I am not suggesting that Emerson's texts are about infinity, although some are. Rather, they grasp the infinite in the performativity of their address, in the hand they extend to their secret addressees, in the bottle to which they've entrusted their fate. As he writes in a journal of 1839: "A lecture is a new literature, which leaves aside all tradition, time, place, circumstance, & addresses an assembly as (pure) mere human beings,—no more . . ." And a bit later, again reflecting on lecturing: "I am to invite men drenched in time to recover themselves and come out of time, & taste their native immortal air."

Readers of the essay "History" may find my line of thinking oblique given Emerson's assertion therein that

When a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me, when a truth that fired the soul of Pindar fires mine, time is no more. When I feel that we two meet in a perception, that our two souls are tinged with the same hue, and do, as it were, run into one, why should I measure degrees of latitude, why should I count Egyptian years?

But one mustn't receive this claim concerning the cessation of time too passively. In the same essay, some pages later, Emerson states: "No man can ante-date his experience, or guess what faculty or feeling a new object shall unlock, any more than he can draw to-day the face of the person whom he shall see to-morrow for the first time." Read back into the earlier remark, this dependence upon the temporality of experience draws the reception of Pindar's fire into a present moment, one that is always potentially novel, even shocking. Emerson's position is thus closer to Celan's than one might have thought. His move to the point beyond Egyptian years is one that moves through the time of experience, and thus, strictly speaking, is not *zeitlos*. It arrives in time, perhaps just in time, and not like a mummy, preserved but lifeless—if I've heard

the qualifier "Egyptian" well. Rather, it arrives still living, still speaking, still seeking a secret addressee, and doing so now, as I address you.

In accepting the infinite offer of Emerson's texts, one enters, perhaps, what Walter Benjamin regards as the *Jetztzeit*, the "now-time" in which a past might be citable in all its moments, in which nothing is lost and everyone has their say. But what does this mean for reading? Benjamin takes the *Jetztzeit* to interrupt the histories of the victor, histories that are told in order to vindicate the privileges and choices of those with the power to tell (and/or publish) histories that murder victims a second time. In our context (to the degree we know it), to receive the provocative offer of an Emersonian claim within the *Jetztzeit* of its address is to resist the reckoning of the victor who claims figures as his or her own, like spoils of war, or consigns them to the graves of the defeated. More concretely, this entails not insisting that Emerson is principally one kind of thinker to the exclusion of another—a protopragmatist, a neo-Hegelian, a Vedantist, or an American original. Likewise, it requires that we struggle against ourselves to receive all that claims our attention in his texts, everything to which his texts bear witness, all the moments marked on the list just given, as well as others left off it: his ecumenical religiosity, his neo-Platonism, his racism, and his struggle to envision a democracy of robust, occasionally sublime citizens, irrespective of race, gender, or class.

In setting Emerson's essays and lectures within the context of Benjamin's and Celan's remarks, I am intensifying the stakes erected in William Gass's "Emerson and the Essay." Gass regards an Emersonian essay as a convocation of writers quoted and invoked for the purpose of pleasure, praise, and a confirmation of the "continuity, the contemporaneity, the reality of writing." A convocation of pleasure and praise, while it may evince the enduring value of writing, lacks the responsive pathos of the Emersonian essay. For Emerson, the reality of writing (and of reading, for that matter) is a reality of witness and provocation, and thus a reality unwilling to celebrate itself on its own behalf. Emerson's writing clamors for our attention so that we might also essay the matter at hand, whether friendship, gifts, or worship. For readers of Emerson, this means that we should care less that Emerson is citing the Koran, Goethe, or himself, and attend instead to the prospects that await one should she or he take a remark to heart. As Emerson says at the outset of *Representative Men*: "But I find him greater, when he can abolish himself and all heroes, by letting in this element of reason, irrespective of persons, this subtilizer, and irresist-

ible upward force, into our thought, destroying individualism;—the power so great, that the potentate is nothing.”

If one receives Emerson’s texts within the now of their address, his corpus undergoes an amazing transformation: it assembles into one long, multifaceted collection of essays, lectures, journals, letters, and sermons. Or, said otherwise, reading Emerson in the now of his address is a matter of moving among one massive conversation, each remark a message in a bottle signed RWE. This is not to presume that the whole presents a unified view. Contemporaneity in no way ensures congruence. In fact, the artificial unity sometimes imposed upon a corpus by the author function fractures when every claim is admitted. In the now of their address it may prove easier, therefore, to critically engage Emerson’s claims, for instance his occasional racial determinism, because we will receive them alongside others, such as his denial in “Experience” that temperament is in any way final or fixed. But more important, by essaying Emerson’s corpus as a contemporaneous phenomenon its manifold witness and challenge can be shared, taken up, and possibly deepened. As Emerson says: “The Past is for us; but the sole terms on which it can become ours are its subordination to the Present.”

The view I am offering is not as crazy as it sounds. The address of an Emersonian text is ever present, always asking to be taken to heart, to be taken personally, and in the fullness of its responsive provocations. His efforts are thus no exception to a rule he so rightly recounts. “A good sentence, a noble verse which I meet in my reading are an epoch in my life. From month to month from year to year they remain fresh & memorable.”

I first read “Self-Reliance” when I was fifteen, with Mary Capello, a first-year teacher from Dickinson College, if my memory serves. Now, more than twenty years later, its address persists, that is, it awaits me, perpetually arriving, even though I am no longer that boy and it is no longer that text for me or anyone else, except perhaps with regard to that time signature I have been calling “Emerson.” I say this because I am still its secret addressee, and so I’ll be whenever I read: “I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional.”

I am not claiming that Emerson’s texts offer secure, timeless truths. What is eternally now is not some propositional content but the now of the event of our reading, the meeting of speaker and addressee, the now in which we might find ourselves upon a stair, upon a series of steps of which we do not know the extremes. This is the now in which self-culture unfolds, conspiring

with teachers, one in which we might meet ourselves and change our lives or, more likely, the now in which we prove afraid of ourselves, of one another, of fortune and death. This is the now of agitation, of an inspiration that convicts us of being something less than inspired and inspiring. In short, this is the now of crisis, a turning point, an unstable moment that no one can resolve for us. As Emerson says in a lecture from 1837, "There are heights of character to which a man must ascend alone—not to be foreshown,—that can only exist by the arrival of the man and the crisis." To take Emerson personally is to risk that arrival, to read as if one's life were at stake, here and now.

WORKS CITED

- T. W. Adorno. *Notes to Literature*. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- G. Douglas Atkins. *Estranging the Familiar*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.
- Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings: 1938–1940*. Vol. 4. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- John Stuart Blackie. *Self-Culture*. New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, 1874.
- Alexander J. Butrym. *Essays on the Essay*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989.
- Stanley Cavell. *Emerson's Transcendental Études*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Paul Celan. *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983.
- W. E. Channing. *The Works of William E. Channing*. Vols. 1–2. New York: Burt Franklin, 1882.
- James Freeman Clarke. *Self-Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1880.
- Claire De Obaldia. *The Essaying Spirit*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- R. W. Emerson. *Centenary Edition*. Vol. 8. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904.
- _____. *Collected Works*. Vols. 1–5, 6. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971–2003.

_____. *Early Lectures*. Vols. 1-2. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964-66.

_____. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*. Vols. 5, 7, 10, 12. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965-76.

William H. Gass. "Emerson and the Essay." *The Yale Review* 71 (1982): 3.

Martin Heidegger. *Gesamtausgabe: Hölderlins Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein."* Vol. 39. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1980.

Cristina Kirklighter. *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002.

Osip Mandelstam. *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*. Ed. Jane Gary Harris. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979.

John Joseph McDermott. *Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

R. D. O'Leary. *The Essay*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1928.

M. Edmund Speare. *The Essay*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1927.

Cornel West. *The American Evasion of Philosophy*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.